

Adult Short Story Honorable Mention

The Last Party

By Nancy Hanlon, Silver Spring

The party was unremarkable, really, except for the fact that we were allowed to be there. It was early summer, 1968. I was a few months shy of my 11th birthday, and Mary was 13, on the cusp of growing up. We were there ostensibly to help my mother serve. I do have a vague memory of circling for a time with a tray of crackers and Velveeta.

The windows of our tiny house were flung open wide and a warm evening breeze wafted through the rooms. The guests were pressed against each other shoulder-to-shoulder in the dining room, even with the table and chairs pushed up against the wall.

Manhattans were being served in Mom's finely-etched glassware and martinis in the stemmed glasses rimmed with tiny glass balls. Olives and maraschino cherries garnished the drinks and occasionally someone would dip their fingers in and grab one to pop in their mouth.

Our older siblings were out for the evening, already old enough to have plans of their own on a Saturday night. The younger two boys were downstairs watching television hoping everyone had forgotten about them as they slyly watched the hands of the clock tick past their normal bedtime.

The house was loud with laughter and hazy with smoke that hung in thick clouds. Everyone smoked; Winstons, Lucky Strikes, Tareytons—they would rather “fight than switch.” The women took long drags off their cigarettes, threw their heads back blowing the smoke up out of everyone's eyes and then waved their hands in front of their faces as if swatting a gnat away. The men blew their smoke straight out.

I can't picture my mother at this party, but clearly, she was there. Presumably in the kitchen emptying ashtrays and filling bowls with Planters cocktail nuts. My father was busy serving drinks and slapping people on the back. He was boisterous and garrulous and periodically yelled something across the room like, “Hey Bill, tell Jack about what happened in church last Sunday!” at which everyone within earshot turned to listen.

Mary and I slipped through the party unnoticed, drinking up every detail. A few months earlier she and I had seen a movie called *The World of Henry Orient* about two adolescent girls navigating an adult world. We were fascinated with those two girls sneaking around New York City without parental oversight. We felt a little bit like them. There was an edgy excitement to the evening. As if we were on the brink of something big.

I closely studied the women. We knew these ladies, mothers whom we saw regularly at church, or in their wood-paneled station wagons carting gaggles of noisy kids around. They were often harried and pulled a child along by the arm. But on this evening, they wore rich, thick lipstick

and sleeveless dresses with pearl necklaces that rested along their collarbones. They smiled easily and threw their heads back when they laughed.

One woman wore a snug dress whose darts accented her breasts in such a way that my mind wandered to the Playtex commercials that ran on television. With a slow reckoning, I finally understood what those cross-your-heart bra ads meant when they said “for the full-figured woman.”

After circling the party awhile, Mary and I retreated to the sidelines. We stood and chatted with feigned enthusiasm as if we were real guests at this party.

“Your outfit is divine darling. Wherever did you get it?”

“This old thing, please. You’re too much!” I exclaimed.

It happily reminded me of the games of pretend she and I used to play not so long before. Mary once loved to play grown-ups with me, dressing up in the beautiful cocktail dresses and satin high heels of our dead Aunt Myra. But she was getting too old for such games now, preferring instead the company of our 16-year-old sister.

As I stood beside her trying to keep up our banter, I could sense Mary’s growing boredom. Pretending was not enough for her anymore.

She spotted someone reaching for a match and ran over, offering to light their cigarette for them. “You’ll spill your drink, let me help,” she said as she expertly struck a match for them. Before long, she was slipping the cigarettes in her mouth and lighting them up herself. She was quick to return them, once lit, before there was time for anyone to object. Everyone laughed at her precociousness.

While she basked in the attention, I nervously looked around the party to see about my parents. There in the kitchen doorway stood my father mixing drinks in his metal cocktail shaker. With a tight grip, he shook it vigorously, holding it above his head so as not to hit the woman squeezing past him. A wisp of hair was curling at his temple and his brow was slightly moist. He was grinning from ear to ear, every tooth in his mouth showing.

Mary came back and motioned for me to follow her to the upstairs bathroom. She had a cigarette hidden under her shirt and was going to show me how to smoke. This was an instructional lesson only. I was just to watch.

She locked the door behind us and climbed up on the toilet. Flipping up the steel locks that held the screen, she poked her head out the window and lit the cigarette. I climbed up on the edge of the tub so that I could reach the window, too.

When we were little, Daddy would stick his head out that same window and throw coins to us in the pool below. Mary and I would swim like mermaids, skimming the bottom of the pool with our fingertips hoping to scoop up an old penny or nickel.

We propped our chins on the sill and stared out at the starry night. The sounds of muffled laughter floated up from below. I smiled thinking about how happy Dad had looked at the party.

Mary held the cigarette out the window and I stuck my head out to watch its glow. The night air reminded me of long ago summer evenings when fresh from our bath Mary and I were allowed to run outside in our nightgowns to kiss my father goodnight. As if no rules applied.

It felt that way again, standing with Mary as she smoked her cigarette. I was happy just to stand next to her and watch as she practiced her inhale and exhale.

She was wearing a sleeveless ribbed shell and her sun-streaked bangs fell across her eyes. The image I have of her that evening is still in sharp focus today. As if this last time we stood as little girls together is preserved in amber. The next year would take her in directions that I was too young to follow—toward boys and makeup and sneaking around.

When the cigarette had burned down to the filter, Mary flicked it out the window and I inched a little closer until my arm was touching hers.